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ABSTRACT

A survey of the status of language usage in Liberia begins with an overview of the distribution of the 16 languages and dialects spoken natively there that are recognized by the government. These include, in order of number of native speakers: Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Mano, Lorma, Krahn, Gola, Mandingo, Kissi, Vai, English, Gbandi, Mende, Belle, and Dey. English is the language of government, law, business, and public education. A matrix follows that rates English and the group of 15 indigenous languages on: (1) their usage rating using State Department classifications; (2) increase and decrease trends by the year 2000; (3) chief of state use in addressing the populace; (4) use in armed forces, government, court, and diplomatic communications, written and oral; (5) use as a language of instruction or required language in higher education, on the secondary and elementary levels, and in adult education; (6) use in the popular press, radio and television broadcasting, and film; (7) business and professional use, written and oral; (8) use in intellectual circles; (9) the alphabet situation; (10) the status of indigenous literature; (11) use in public signs and notices; and (12) the availability of instructional materials and dictionaries in the native languages for use in English as a second language. Explanatory notes give the number and population percentages using the languages, the type of alphabet used, and specific instructional material titles. A selected bibliography is also included. (MSE)

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Language/Area Reference Center

COUNTRY STATUS REPORT:

LIBERIA

June 1984

Prepared by:

Barbara Robson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Liberia - 1, Overview

There are about twenty-eight languages and dialects spoken natively in Liberia, sixteen of which were recognized by the previous government, and continue to be considered as Liberian languages by the military government now in control of the country. The sixteen are, in order of number of native speakers, Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Mano, Lorma, Krahn, Gola, Mandingo, Kissi, Vai, English, Gbandi, Mende, Belle and Dey. None of the sixteen is spoken natively by more than about 300,000 people, and none by more than 20% of the population.

Of the sixteen, only English has had any official status whatsoever. Pre-coup Liberia was governed, and the society entirely dominated, by the Americo-Liberians, native-English-speaking descendents of the freed slaves who migrated from the United States in the early nineteenth century to settle Liberia. The Americo-Liberians' language policy has been based on the assumption that the entire population of Liberia spoke English, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary: governmental affairs, court proceedings, business, and other aspects of modernized society have been developed solely in English. The result of this policy and others equally "Amerocentric" has been a schizophrenic situation in which there are two Liberias - a little brother to the United States and a country in Africa - with very little connection between the two. A dramatic illustration of language policy has been in public education. The educational system has not only been English-medium throughout, but English has been taught from the first grade as though the students already spoke it natively; "illiteracy", used in Liberia to mean inability to speak English, has been considered a handicap, rather than the normal starting point for educational efforts. This educational policy has produced a system acknowledged by all to be a failure: students' dismal performance on school-leaving examinations, the necessity for remedial programs at the University of Liberia, the continuing astronomical illiteracy rate, and a growing problem with juvenile delinquency have been laid at the educational system's door.

In the three years since the People's Redemption Council took over the Liberian Government, there have been indications that the language policy will be changed. Little of substance along these lines has been accomplished, as yet; the PRC has had its hands full dealing with economic problems and taking steps towards the re-establishment of a civilian government - setting the stage for multi-party elections, broadening its tribal and political bases, writing a draft constitution, etc. - in April, 1985.

The draft constitution, published in March 1983 for comment and revision, contains language which on the one hand recognizes ethnic differences and on the other encourages nationalism. It also specifically states that "Emphasis shall be placed on the mass education of the Liberian people and the elimination of illiteracy" (Article 6), and that "the business of the Legislature shall be conducted in the English language or.....in one or more of the languages of the Republic" (Article 43). There has also been public discussion of the possibility of adopting one or the other of the indigenous languages as a national language. Kpelle (spoken or understood by about 60% of the population) has been mentioned as a candidate, as has Vai on the strength of its script. It is unlikely that English will be supplanted, however; in addition to its native speakers, who hold much of the intellectual power in the country, it is spoken in one form or another as a second language by thousands.

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Liberia - 2, Language Use Matrix

LIBERIA

Factoids	English	15 Indigenous languages
1. Usage rating*	1	4
2. Increase/decrease	2	2
3. Chief of State use?	1	0
4. Armed Forces/written	1	0
5. Armed Forces/oral	2	4
6. Government/written	1	0
7. Government/oral, national	1	0
8. Government/oral, local	0	3
9. Court/written	1	0
10. Court/oral	1	3
11. Diplomatic use?	1	0
12. Higher education	1	0
13. Higher ed: required?	1	0
14. Secondary education	1	0
15. Secondary: required?	1	0
16. Primary education	1	0
17. Primary: required?	1	1
18. Adult education	2	4
19. Popular press use	2	3
20. Transmission across borders?	1	1
21. Use in radio broadcasting	2	2
22. Use in TV broadcasting	2	0
23. Use in film	1	0
24. Business/professional/written	1	0
25. Business/professional/oral	2	3
26. Use in intellectual circles	1	0
27. Alphabet situation*	1	2
28. Status of literature	2	0
29. Use in signs?	1	0
30. Teaching materials*	-	2
31. Bilingual dictionaries*	-	2

Notes:

Matrix figures are explained on following pages

? = information unavailable within time frame of project

- = not applicable

* = footnotes on following pages

FOOTNOTES

1. 1984 ESTIMATES, NUMBERS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS

Language	Number of native speakers	Percentage of population
Kpelle	415,800	19.8%
Bassa	298,200	14.2
Gio	180,000	8.6
Kru	168,000	8.0
Mano	153,300	7.3
Lorma	105,000	5.0
Krahn	98,700	4.7
Gola	94,500	4.5
Mandingo	79,800	3.8
Kissi	71,400	3.4
Vai	67,200	3.2
English	58,800	2.8
Gbandi	42,200	2.0
Mende	10,500	.5
Belle	10,500	.5
Dey	8,400	.4

27. TYPE OF ALPHABET USED

Language	Alphabet
English	roman
Kpelle	roman, indigenous syllabary
Bassa	roman, indigenous syllabary
Lorma	roman, indigenous syllabary
Vai	standardized indigenous syllabary

30. TEACHING MATERIALS FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Language	Texts
Kpelle	Kohn, James J. et al. Beginning Kpelle: A Course for Speakers of English. San Francisco: San Francisco State College, 1968.
	Thach, Sharon, and David J. Dwyer. Kpelle: A Reference Handbook of Phonetics, Grammar, Lexicon and Learning Procedures. East Lansing, MI: The African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1981.

31. DICTIONARIES FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Language	Text
Kpelle	Liedenfrost, Theodore E. and John S. McKay. Kpelle-English Dictionary. Totota: Kpelle Literacy Center, Lutheran Church in Liberia, 1973.

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - a

1. Usage rating, using the State Department classifications
   1: Official language, most widely used.
   2: Official language, not most widely used.
   3: Widely used language, but not official. (Over 10% of population)
   4: Unofficial language used by significant minority (but less than 3)
   5: Unofficial language used by influential minority
      FOOTNOTE: NUMBERS OF SPEAKERS, PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION

2. Increase/decrease trends by the year 2000
   1: Number of native speakers will increase in proportion
   2: Number of native speakers will remain proportionally constant
   3: Number of native speakers will decrease in proportion

3. Chief of State use, in addressing populace: YES (1) NO (0)

4. Armed Forces written communications
   1: Only language used in official communiques
   2: One of the languages used in official communiques
   0: Not used in official communiques

5. Armed Forces oral communications
   1: Used on all levels
   2: Used among officers only
   3: Used among multi-lingual NCO's and troops
   4: Used among monolingual troops only
   0: Not used

6. Written government communications
   1: Only language used in official communications
   2: One of the languages used in official communications
   0: Not used in official communications

7. Oral government communications/national level
   1: Official language spoken in national assembly
   2: One of the official languages spoken in national assembly
   0: Not used in government

8. Oral government communications/local level
   1: Official language in local government
   2: One of the official languages used in local government
   3: Allowed in local government proceedings, translated into official language
   0: Not used in local government

9. Court use in written communications
   1: Only language used in official communications
   2: One of the languages used in official communications
   0: Not used

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - b

10. Court use in oral communications
    1: Only official language used in court
    2: One of the official languages used in court
    3: Allowed in courts, translated into official language(s)
    0: Not used in courts

11. Diplomatic use in notes to other countries: YES (1) NO (0)

12. Use in higher education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used

13. Language taught as subject in required courses in higher education:
    YES (1) NO (0)

14. Use in secondary education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used as medium of instruction

15. Language taught as subject in required courses on secondary level?
    YES (1) NO (0)

16. Use in primary education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used as medium of instruction

17. Language taught as subject in required courses on primary level?
    YES (1) NO (0)

18. Language use in adult education
    1: Used in oral and written technical instruction
    2: Used in oral and written life skills instruction
    3: Used in oral life skills instruction
    4: Used in literacy classes only
    0: Not used in adult informal education

19. Language use in popular press
    1: Used in publications throughout country
    2: Used in centrally-based publications with national distribution
    3: Used only in regional and local publications
    4: Used in clandestine publications only
    0: Not used

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - c

20. Language used in radio/TV transmission across national borders?
YES (1) NO (0)

21. Language use in radio broadcasting
1: Language used broadcasting thoughout country
2: Language used in centrally-based national broadcasts
3: Language used in local broadcasting only
3: Language used in clandestine broadcasting only
0: Language not used in radio broadcasting

22. Language use in TV broadcasting
1: Language used in telecasting throughout country
2: Language used in centrally-based national telecasting
3: Language used regional and local telecasting only
0: Language not used in TV

23. Language use in film
1: Language used in indigenous film-making
2: Foreign-language films dubbed/subtitled into langua
0: Language not used in films

24. Business/Professional use - written
1: Sole official language in business and professional communications
2: One of the official languages in business and professional communication
0: Not used

25. Business/Professional use - oral
1: Used in trade and commerce throughout country
2: Used in national trade and commerce only
3: Used only in local trade and commerce

26. Language use in intellectual circles
1: Language used in indigenous scholarly publications
2: Language used in formal scholarly discussion
0: Language not used

27. Alphabet situation
1: Established standardized alphabet exists.
2: Alphabet developed, no standardization
3: Competing alphabets exist
0: No alphabet exists
FOOTNOTE: TYPE OF ALPHABET USED

28. Status of indigenous literature
1: Established written tradition exists
2: Literature tradition emerging
3: Popular literature exists
0: No written literature exists

29. Language used in official public signs, notices: YES (1) NO (0)

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - d

30. Teaching materials for English speakers
    1: Wide range of teaching materials exists
    2: Narrow range of teaching materials exists
    0: No teaching materials exist
    FOOTNOTE: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

31. Dictionaries for English speakers
    1: Wide range of bilingual dictionaries exists
    2: Narrow range of dictionaries exists
    0: No dictionaries exist
    FOOTNOTE: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY